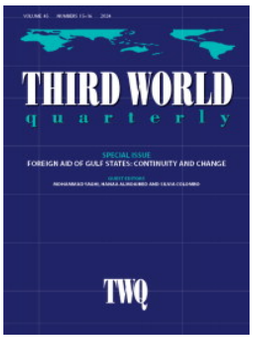

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Saudi Arabia's foreign aid: the singularity of Yemen as a case study

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ABSTRACT

This article examines aid as a foreign policy tool for power and influence. In doing so, it highlights the historical and contemporary Saudi–Yemeni relationship to analyse the different patterns of Saudi aid over the last three decades, including shifts in aid criteria and allocation. The article travels between 1994 and 2022, accounting for domestic, regional and international structures and dynamics that influenced the strategy, direction, scope and sum of Saudi aid. Saudi Arabia's use of foreign aid as an instrument of political ordering and control is not only governed by the kingdom's complex and multifaceted relation with Yemen, whose particularities and contingencies call for thorough consideration. Rather, regional and international realities also play a role. All these external influences are mediated by the priorities and perceptions of the Saudi leadership, whose decisions are also affected by elite struggles, domestic politics and institutional arrangements, and for whom Yemen invariably represents a source of concern– but also of opportunity. The work embraces a neoclassical realist framework to make sense of how domestic and external shifts redefined and redirected aid as concept and practice.

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Introduction

The Middle East is a heavily interconnected region where the projection of power occurs at different political and social levels. This article studies the relationship between foreign aid policy and shifts in domestic and regional structures and dynamics in the Middle East by analysing Saudi aid directed to Yemen from 1994 to 2022. This work will study essential aspects that characterised Saudi foreign policy in the last three decades by engaging with how aid has been deployed in Yemen during different domestic, regional and international phases. To do so, the article will discuss chief continuities and changes that affected aid strategy fundamentally and will examine how Saudi aid was facilitated, allocated and received. How has Saudi aid as a foreign policy tool developed in time and space in Yemen? What factors have shaped Saudi foreign aid to Yemen over the last several decades?

Saudi foreign policy has endured many phases that have shaped its concerns and aims. The 1990–1991 Gulf War, the 9/11 events, post-2003 concerns over Iranian expansionism,

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the 2011 regional uprisings, and entering the war in Yemen in 2015 all are key events that moulded how Saudi aid has been utilised as a foreign policy instrument. The same can be said about the recipient, Yemen. Political stances taken by Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's president until 2012, affected the flow of Saudi aid, especially in the years after the Gulf War. Aid policies, especially for competitive states, have been essential in comprehending Middle Eastern politics (Hussien 2021).

In fact, the case of Saudi foreign aid in Yemen is perhaps the most representative instance of how aid in the Middle East is dictated by political objectives and concerns that revolve around control and influence in the long term. That being said, characteristics of Saudi aid to Yemen have tremendously transformed in the last 30 years, from being profoundly religiously and tribally induced in the 1990s and 2000s to becoming concerned with providing developmental, educational, and health aid.

Looking at different critical junctures and developments in the period 1994–2022, we will chart the relationship between combinations of factors and the patterns of allocation, conduits, and audiences of Saudi foreign aid. The article utilises a neoclassical realist framework that connects internal dynamics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to external challenges and opportunities in Yemen and the broader Middle East to understand how KSA's foreign aid has developed over the last several decades. The first analytical section, discussing Saudi aid to Yemen from 1994 to 2011, collects much of its primary data from the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), while the second section relies on two main aid databases, namely the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'s Financial Tracking Service and the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief)'s Saudi Aid Platform. Secondary sources include academic writings, policy reports and commentaries, research blogs and news articles. These sources were found in English or Arabic, the latter being largely written by Yemeni and Saudi scholars. The following section presents the analytical framework drawing on a neoclassical realist approach, followed by a brief background on the legacy of Saudi aid towards Yemen before 1994, when some key elements informing Saudi aid in the later periods took shape. Then, two empirical sections are presented that cover KSA's foreign aid to Yemen from 1994 to 2011 and from 2011 to 2022, respectively.

Conceptual and theoretical framework: aid and neoclassical realism

Aid is a complex and elusive concept, albeit an inescapably political (and politicised) one. Why, when, how and to whom aid is allocated are questions that bring forth 'political and strategic considerations' (Alesina and Dollar 2000, 33). In its relatively short history, it has been proven that foreign aid's developmental imperatives quickly gave room to uses consolidating it as an effective tool of statecraft (Bryant 2016, 5). Examples of aid becoming an integral part of foreign policy abound. The US Marshall Plan, China's assistance to North Korea and African countries (Park and Kim 2017), and the European Union's allocations to Turkey (Young and Zihnioglu 2021) are some of the instances reflecting a widespread logic and practice. Even when 'solidarity' underpins much of a state's aid policy (Almezaini 2012, 17), constructed identities, norms and roles have been shaped by political trajectories that condition the structures of aid allocation, articulating differences between possible recipients and non-recipients, and amongst the recipients themselves. These more subtle interferences of the politics of aid are joined by the upward politicisation that Gulf foreign aid has experienced in the past several decades (Almezaini 2021). Here, KSA is no exception.

Like that of other Gulf donor countries, KSA's foreign aid has not seamlessly adjusted to Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) standards. In its broadest definition, it can take many different forms, making a complete categorisation of aid a challenging task. Although KSA tends to lead in multilateral funding schemes to Yemen, the majority of aid is transferred on a bilateral basis (Sons 2022, para. 13). A sizeable part of Saudi aid traverses through governmental channels and has governmental recipients, but the diverse and fractionalised composition of Yemen's social space and its relationship with the state blurs the distinction between governmental and non-governmental, complicated by patrimonial structures. Beyond that, KSA is known for financing and promoting *da'wa* activities and religious projects, in parallel to an opaque system of payments to Yemeni tribes that has been in place for decades (Stenslie 2013, 1). Therefore, focusing solely on Saudi 'official' aid obscures the bigger picture (Hill 2017; Schmitz 2016), not least due to the role of quasi-independent charities, donations from the Saudi business class, and allocations by royal family members through personalistic connections and in a semi-private capacity.

While it is possible to draw some meaningful insights out of the collection and analysis of data related to these elusive conduits of aid, the methodological challenge is clear. Evidence tends to be incomplete, based on estimates, and often anecdotal. We have tried to use reliable sources for our analysis and indicated which figures represent approximations to an unknown exact quantity. Information related to or published by Saudi state agencies performs better, but only to a certain extent. KSA ultimately decides the scope and depth of aid data supplied to OCHA. Until 2015, the Saudi state had not embarked on a considerable institutional process of documenting and registering foreign aid (Hamid 2022), and even then, the information made available lacks disaggregation and often is clearly selective (Publish What You Fund 2022).

In light of such complexity, we are compelled to adopt a deliberately vague and open conceptualisation of foreign aid, consisting of 'all resources–physical goods, skills and technical know-how, financial grants (gifts), or loans (at concessional rates)–transferred by donors to recipients' (Riddell 2007, 17) – that is, from Saudi actors to Yemeni actors, focusing on Saudi donors deemed to advance the interests or act with the backing of the state (including the state itself). Our analysis will identify some of the main Saudi and Yemeni actors involved in these foreign aid flows. Taking 2011 as a critical year, the analysis can be divided into two interrelated time frames. The first period spans from the reunification of the Yemeni state in 1994 to the 2011 uprisings. The second part covers the period between 2011 and 2022, when the creation of the Presidential Leadership Council marked a new political phase in Yemen. For both periods, we argue that a great deal of Saudi foreign aid to Yemen has followed the logic of projection and cultivation of influence and a particular vision of order for Yemen, rendering it a political tool.

It is important to stress that the purposes of foreign aid can be many and are contingent upon context. Van der Veen's taxonomy identifies up to seven frames that can alternatively provide the dominant rationale behind aid policy (2011, 10). Aid can be a tool of either soft or hard power, but it can also be both at the same time (Blair, Marty, and Roessler 2022, 5)–a means of coercion for some and a means of attraction for others. Moreover, aid can be assessed both by tracing the donor's intentionality behind aid and/or the perceptual and behavioural outcomes amongst audiences and recipients. Our focus on KSA's doing means we are better positioned to explore the use of aid as a capability, while commenting on the possible effects on relevant audiences can be done only with greater circumspection. In

other words, our analysis centres on the convergence of factors shaping Saudi foreign aid to Yemen, the ensuing patterns of allocation through different and evolving conduits, and the rationale(s) behind the targeting of particular recipients and audiences, rather than the effects on the recipients' and audiences' attitudes and dispositions. Since the focus is on how Saudi aid as a foreign policy tool is formed and deployed, resorting to a theoretical framework situated in the foreign policy analysis (FPA) tradition has much to offer.

Drawing from Rose's (1998) and later contributions to FPA, we argue neoclassical realism offers a useful lens in the attempt to elucidate the evolving clusters of factors conditioning the multiple manifestations of Saudi aid. A neoclassical realist approach suggests donors resort to aid in order to shape their external environment. However, its strength derives from the ability to move away from approaches focusing exclusively on systemic variables and recognising the causal force of factors operating in the domestic environment, and thus situates the foreign policymaking process, in which aid represents an actionable tool, between the external and the domestic. In this sense, it can account for the mediation of ideas between material structures and foreign policy outcomes (Meibauer 2020). Policymakers' choices respond to external pressures filtered through 'transmission belts' at the domestic level (Juneau 2015). Although the complexity of factors at both levels during the 1994–2022 period discourages us from outlining specific variables, our approach identifies a guiding analytical structure. Since neoclassical realists posit that shaping the external environment is foreign policy's main goal, it is external structures, events, developments, dynamics and pressures that represent the primary factors enabling or constraining aid policy. Nevertheless, there are intervening variables at the unit level that interact with the external dimension and define the ways the latter is interpreted and acted upon. On the one hand, foreign aid reflects a realist notion dictated by relative power, whether on a regional (i.e. Middle East) or a bilateral (i.e. Saudi–Yemeni relationship) basis. On the other hand, the domestic context and the decision-making process add a constructivist dimension to the patterns and details of aid, as the prevailing perceptions and priorities amongst the ruling elite condition how states make sense of their external environment.

In light of the above, our framework observes continuities and changes, events and developments, dynamics and pressures affecting Saudi foreign aid at two levels of analysis and their interplay: (1) an external dimension, encompassing the regional context and the Yemeni context; and (2) an internal dimension, comprising factors traversing domestic politics, elite struggles, and decision-making structures and perceptions. The external dimension conditions the possibilities of Saudi foreign aid, whereas the internal dimension shapes its directionality and content. That being said, these dimensions are not independent from one another, being better seen as 'interacting causal variables' (George and Bennett 2005, 212) in the policymaking process. The possibilities afforded by the external environment gain meaning through the policymakers' dispositions partially informed by domestic factors and, in turn, their domestically situated dispositions filter the possibilities in the external environment.

Background: Saudi–Yemeni particularities and aid conduits before 1994

The particularities of the Saudi–Yemeni relationship include ideational and material aspects in their details. Essentially, their geographical proximity makes the existence of relations between modern-day Yemen and KSA a historical, sociopolitical, economic and cultural prerequisite (Gause 1992). Since the 1934 Taif Agreement, the relations between KSA and Yemen

have developed in an unsettled manner. From the Saudi perspective, it has been primarily informed by security threats coming from Yemen (Darwich 2018). The 1934 agreement ended a war that lasted for three years over a border dispute between KSA under King Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman al-Saud, Yemen's Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din and Prince Muhammad bin Ali al-Idrisi, the founder of the Idrisi state (Gause 1992). The outcome of the 1934 war favoured the interests of al-Saud, giving KSA complete control over the regions of Asir, Najran and Jizan.

Another significant event that shaped the bilateral relationship was the eruption of the civil war in Yemen in September 1962, which brought dramatic challenges to KSA in the areas of security and economy. KSA found itself enmeshed in a proxy war with Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt for influence in Yemen. During the same time KSA witnessed a domestic struggle between two main factions in the royal family. The struggle between King Saud and his Crown Prince and Prime Minister Faisal divided the family and the Saudi elite in the early 1960s (Mann 2013). King Faisal emerged victorious in 1963 in a bloodless coup. Prince Sultan, Defence Minister for nearly five decades, was first appointed with Faisal's favour in the same year (Al Arabiya 2015). This domestic shift in KSA, along with the growing threat posed by Nasser, led to a new regional confrontation spilling over into Yemen. By mid-1963, 'Nasser, in response to increased Saudi aid to the royalists, escalated the confrontation by sending his air force to bomb Saudi border towns, which were being used as training grounds and staging posts for the royalists' (Gerges 1995, 307). This rivalry ended in the Khartoum Agreement of August 1967 between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, stipulating the withdrawal of the Egyptian forces from Yemen (Kerr 1970).

One of KSA's measures in Yemen to establish a strong presence against Nasser in 1963 was the creation of the Special Committee for Yemen Affairs, becoming the first official Saudi conduit of bilateral aid. The Committee worked under the supervision of Prince Sultan, who took over the Yemeni file. The Committee included Saudi bureaucrats and figures of Yemen's tribal and political elite in the north to discuss and decide on political, economy and security affairs (Nu'mann 2020). However, no data is available on Saudi aid during the civil war in the 1960s.

The second aid conduit established in the pre-1994 period was the Saudi–Yemeni Coordination Council. It was created in 1975, after the warring parties in Yemen agreed on a roadmap to establish a national political framework (Yemen Presidency 2006). The Council was also run by Prince Sultan. It has served to catalyse Saudi influence in multiple ways, while intended to support economic relations, increase trade volumes and develop joint investments between Yemen and KSA. Held every three months, the sessions of the Coordination Council built cooperation in various areas, financing, inter alia, educational, cultural, media, transportation, health, water and electricity projects, and the building of mosques (Fahmi 1992, 234). Between 1975 and 1987, the Council mobilised approximately 1.25 Saudi riyals (about 0.3 billion US dollars) (Yemen Presidency 2006). As per Anthony's writing on the diffraction of Saudi aid provided to Yemen during that era:

> Having underwritten a large portion of Yemen's development needs through direct cash payments and in-kind contributions, Saudi Arabia, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, helped pay for a substantial portion of the medical clinics, hospitals, mosques and schools built in Yemen. Moreover, Saudia, the national airline of Saudi Arabia, took a major equity stake in Yemen's national air carrier, Yemenia, as a means of enabling Yemen to have its own independent fleet of civil aircraft. (Anthony 1999)

However, the 1990s marked an exceptional period of relations, veering towards a state of apathy as the result of Yemen's stance on Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (Gause 1992) and affecting the Saudi–Yemeni trajectory of aid. The bilateral relationship suffered after President Saleh decided to stand in agreement with Saddam Hussein's attack on Kuwait, which signified the worst chapter in Saudi–Yemeni relations since 1978, the year Saleh was elected president. KSA cut its support for the Yemeni budget, mainly dependent on Saudi funding (Hussien 2021), and expelled more than 800,000 Yemeni workers. Regarding the rights of foreign workers, KSA had a preferential arrangement with Yemen that none of the other Arab countries shared. On 31 May 1989, less than six months before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, King Fahd issued a decree which 'stipulates the exclusion of the Yemeni people from some of the legal procedures that are required for the residents and workers in Saudi Arabia and giving them the advantages enjoyed by the Saudi citizen' (Fahmi 1992, 240). This decision gravely affected Yemen's economy, compounded by the loss of aid (Katz 1992).

Saudi aid between 1994 and 2011: a period of regional shifts and domestic differences

This section studies the main aspects that shaped Saudi aid policy to Yemen in the period between 1994, which marks the country's unification, and 2011, the year of the regional uprisings. In those 15 years, domestic, regional and international shifts influenced the Saudi aid policy system, including its main patterns, allocations and conduits. Aid to Yemen was delivered through four conduits: (1) aid afforded by the Special Committee headed by Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz; (2) aid decided by the Saudi–Yemeni Coordination Council; (3) governmental aid approved by the cabinet and delivered by the SFD; and (4) aid provided by charities owned by individuals of Yemeni descent, especially from Hadramawt, belonging to the business community. The article's background section has introduced the second and third conduits. These four channels through which aid was distributed to Yemen show the significance and complexity of the Saudi–Yemeni relationship. Characteristically, decentralisation was the main marker that distinguished the Saudi aid system prior to 2011. From 2005 onwards, however, decentralisation was brought down to a degree, after King Abdullah was crowned.

If the Gulf War's outcome did not help Saleh, the consequences of the Yemeni civil war in 1994 reshaped the direction of the bilateral relationship with KSA in his favour. After the consolidation of Saleh's rule over the whole of Yemen, the bilateral relationship grew expediently to cover multiple aspects. The revival of Saudi aid to Yemen followed the restoration of the relationship between the two neighbours through three main political events. The first was the signing of the memorandum of understanding between KSA and Yemen in 1995 in Mecca (PA-X Peace Agreement Database 1995). The second was the signing of a security cooperation agreement in 1996, and the third was the passing of the permanent international border treaty for land and sea borders between the two countries in 2000 in Jeddah.

The expansion of Saudi aid to Yemen followed the approval of the three agreements above, especially the 2000 border treaty, which addressed a significant historical dispute that goes back to 1934 (Ramadan and Al-Ganad 2022). In fact, there is no aid project to be shown from 1994 to 2000 on the official website of the Saudi Aid Platform. The first listed project (KSRelief 2022a), dating from 2001, was the construction of a power station in Marib at a cost of $50 million by the SFD. Also in 2001, Yemen received funds for charities and orphanages in coordination with the Yemeni Ministry of Insurance and Social Affairs.

Along with the unification and the signature of the treaties, another factor that affected Saudi aid policies to Yemen was the six wars fought between the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement between 2004 and 2009. Due to this, aid allocation was altered in many northern parts of Yemen, especially in Saada. There is no academic or journalistic work that studies the direct effects of the six rounds of war on the trajectory of Saudi aid in Yemen. However, as Saada was fully besieged and under constant attacks by the Yemeni army from 2004 until 2009, the allocation of aid projects was dismissed from the northern province. The Houthis first emerged as the 'Believing Youth' movement in the late 1990s. After the 2011 uprisings, the movement adopted the official name Ansar Allah (Partisans of God). Members of the Houthi movement adhere to the Shi'a-Zaidi sect and belong to the same ancestry as the former Imams that ruled Yemen under the Zaidi Imamate for nearly 1000 years. The group's founder and first leader was Hussein Badr el-Din al-Houthi, a cleric who focused on Zaidi revivalism in the northern provinces, especially in the group's stronghold governate of Saada (Salisbury 2018).

The Special Committee used to meet twice annually to discuss issues with the Council of Yemeni Tribes, made up of the heads of Yemeni tribes and controlled by al-Ahmar, the most influential family of the Hashid tribe (Nu'mann 2020). The death of Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar in 2007 affected the Special Committee greatly. He had built a solid alliance with KSA and, thanks to Saudi economic and political support, he formed a centre of power inside the north of Yemen. Most of the aid provided by the committee was undocumented and went to tribal leaders. The Hashid tribe was the largest beneficiary of Saudi aid provided by the committee (Phillips 2011, 78).

For instance, al-Ahmar used to receive a monthly allocation estimated at $800,000 (Al Sharjabi 2012; Phillips 2011, 79). With the death of Abdullah al-Ahmar, and with his son Sadiq taking over the tribal sheikhdom, the centre of the power of the al-Ahmar family began to weaken. With the death of Prince Sultan in 2011, the degree of KSA's follow-up to developments in Yemen declined. The large salaries the committee paid to tribal, political and media figures were reviewed, and King Abdullah stopped them as a matter of rationalising spending (Albaki 2015). The decision taken by King Abdullah was a significant shift in domestic dynamics that affected aid trajectory and delivery.

With the passing of King Fahad in 2005 the role of the Special Committee was altered, and more focus was paid to governmental institutions. The SFD assumed a significant role in creating and delivering aid policy approved by the cabinet. But, organisationally, this did not affect Prince Sultan's upper hand on the Yemeni file as chairman of the Coordination Council. SFD had a significant role in development projects in Yemen, where it supervised grants in several public sectors and provided a number of loans concentrated in the sectors of roads, health, vocational education and technical training.

Moreover, SFD approved financing lines and direct operations to back national exports in Yemen to a total amount of $120 million, of which about $37.5 million was deposited to the public sector institutions and about $70 million targeted the private sector in 2005 (KSRelief 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). A prime example of this can be seen in the London Donor Conference in 2006. KSA and Yemen signed multiple memorandums in different areas of aid that were supervised by the Saudi–Yemeni Coordination Council and implemented by the SFD in 2006–2007, amounting to $289 million (Asharq Al-Awsat 2010).

One of the most significant aid campaigns approved by the Saudi cabinet and carried out by SFD in Yemen took place in 2008, in response to the flood disaster that hit the south

of the country. Through the Council of Ministers, King Abdullah donated $100 million in response to the effects of the disaster that particularly affected the Hadramawt and al-Mahrah governorates, in addition to sending large quantities of supplies and foodstuff (Saudi Press Agency 2008). The disaster affected almost all of Yemen's highways, which led to a loan agreement by the Saudi cabinet in the amount of $106 million to finance the dual road project (Amran-Sana'a-Dhamar-Ibb-Aden). All the projects decided by the cabinet were implemented by the SFD.

Lastly, the fourth main conduit of aid was provided by Saudi businessmen of Hadhrami roots. This conduit shows the resilience of the familial, linguistic and cultural communalities shared by KSA and Yemen. Donating money to build mosques was the predominant trend until Saudi businessmen of Yemeni origin became aware of the importance of development projects, especially in Hadhramaut (Hussien 2021, 265). In 2002, Sheikh Muhammad bin Mahfouz, the previous head of the Saudi National Bank and a member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Awn Charity Foundation, financed the construction of rainwater collection tanks and the establishment of a drinking water supply system.

In 2006, Al-Awn was launched and one of its flagship projects focused on the improvement of Yemeni girls' education (2022). It renovated a boys' school, turned it into a girls' school, and appointed qualified female teachers. In the beginning, girls finished their formal education in this institution in the fifth year of primary school, but the situation developed so that girls could complete their primary education. In 2008, and due to the flood disaster previously mentioned, al-Awn financed a project to fight malaria in Hadhramaut, Al-Mahra and Shabwa. Tycoon Abdullah Bugshan, a Saudi of Hadrami origin, donated to build two secondary schools for outstanding male students: the first in Mukalla and the second in Seiyun (Hadhramout Foundation 2007). In this context, the charitable medical association Taiba, founded by a group of Saudi businessmen in 1994, was a prime example of aid diversification. It supported the health and education sectors by financing medical camps, charitable programmes, heart surgeries and combating blindness.

This section studied Saudi aid policy as a tool for the projection of power involving its governmental and non-governmental outlets from 1994 to 2011. As shown through the analysis, there is a clear relation between aid, on the one hand, and external and domestic factors, on the other. The mutability of Saudi aid showed multiple patterns in the attempt to influence different demographics, areas and audiences.

Between the uprisings and the Presidential Leadership Council: projecting influence and ordering politics in Yemen

The following section examines the patterns of Saudi foreign aid in a period of tremendous turbulence and change across multiple levels of analysis. After the expectations for an inclusive political transition ignited by the mass mobilisations of 2011, the country descended into an armed conflict that precipitated an unprecedented Saudi-led military intervention. Much has occurred since then, culminating in a fragile nation-wide truce, the resignation of Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi from the internationally recognised government, and the formation of an eight-member presidential council by the main Yemeni partners of the Saudi-led coalition. The character and structure of Saudi aid have undergone substantial transformations in the interim. A neoclassical realist framework can provide useful guidance to unpack such transformations of Saudi aid as a foreign policy tool. It is the war,

indeed, and the broader political struggle that has pitted contrasting aspirations, interests, grievances and visions against each other, which has most crucially impinged on the kingdom's orientation and scope of foreign aid. International and regional developments have also played a role. All these external influences are mediated by the priorities and perceptions of the Saudi leadership, whose decisions are also affected by elite struggles, domestic politics and institutional arrangements, and for whom Yemen invariably represents a source of concern– but also of opportunity.

The outbreak of the 2011 uprisings coincided with similar episodes of popular mobilisation across the region. The 'Friends of Yemen', an international grouping formed to support the country's political stability, suspended any further development and economic aid to Yemen as long as Saleh refused to resign. Therefore, Saudi aid was effectively withheld for the most part of the first year of protests, pending the definition of a path out the crisis (Hill and Nonneman 2011, 14). In reality, the halt of foreign aid symbolised Saleh's loss of international support from KSA and the US that ultimately led to his ousting. Vice President Hadi became the head of government in early 2012 with the expectation of caretaking the transitional process, brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and organising a National Dialogue Conference. Saudi economic aid to Hadi's government resumed immediately after its inauguration. The kingdom arranged a $1 billion deposit to Yemen's Central Bank and several rounds of budgetary support in 2012 and 2013, followed by further budget and social welfare money in 2014 (KSRelief 2022d). An estimated $4 billion in Saudi aid was received by the new government between 2012 and 2014, including cash, oil products and other direct transfers (Salisbury 2018, 15).

Upholding Hadi's term and preventing the transition's derailment were goals closely interrelated with the Saudi approach to the uprisings across the Middle East. KSA was primarily concerned with regional stability and the preservation of the status quo where deemed favourable. On the one hand, sub-state geographical distribution of aid between 2010 and 2013 in Yemen was largely allocated to high-population areas in the north and west, arguably trying to assuage domestic discontent 'rather than long-term poverty' (Perla 2015). On the other hand, international audiences were to receive confirmation of KSA's role as Yemen's main external patron. The period surrounding the start of the uprisings also witnessed significant readjustments in Saudi decision-making. Prince Sultan's deteriorating health and the sharpening of the power struggle between royal family members translated into contradictory aid flows, even resulting in the closure of the Special Office (Hill and Nonneman 2011, 9). The deaths of Princes Sultan, Nayef and Muqrin severely impacted Riyadh's lines of communication with Yemeni partners (Radman 2022, 10). Later on, rumours surfaced that Crown Prince Salman had taken over the system of stipends (Stenslie 2013, 2). If true, the incumbent king's role in the Yemeni portfolio could be seen to have set in motion a change in Saudi aid decision-making and institutional structure for years to come. That is, it served as a pre-condition for the ongoing process tightening the grip on aid under the close supervision of a more centralised and verticalised state–explained in more detail below.

By 2014, actors with important stakes in the political transition had antagonised it enough to seek its demise. The Houthis launched an armed offensive that brought Sana'a under their control and advanced southward reaching Aden (Hill 2017, 7). Their territorial gains and the pressing uncertainty over Hadi's future paralleled a number of rapidly unfolding developments. At the domestic level, the death of King Abdullah and the ascendance of King Salman came with profound changes in the ruling elite. The burgeoning centralisation of power

around the new king's son, Muhammad bin Salman (MbS), took off with his appointment as Minister of Defence and the ensuing responsibility over the Yemeni file. As strained relations with the Obama administration increased concerns over the US commitment to the kingdom's security (Radman 2022, 12), the conflict in Yemen presented an opportunity for building MbS's authority, galvanising Saudi nationalism and symbolising a new chapter under an assertive and strong leadership (Clausen 2019, 77). An acute threat perception regarding Iran's interference aggravated the sense of insecurity. All these multilevel elements converged in the launch of the Saudi-led military intervention in March 2015. The United Nations (UN) resolutions that followed enshrined the status of internationally recognised government (IRG), now based in Aden, and locked KSA's role to Hadi's fate in the war.

Yemen's existential nature for KSA made itself visible in the exponential increase of aid despite a downward trend in international oil prices and a new leadership preoccupied with undertaking massive domestic transformations. In April 2016, just over a year into the military intervention, MbS unveiled 'Vision 2030', a comprehensive framework whose ambitions for domestic overhaul raised questions about how to engage in Yemen. These pressures meant that, Yemen's importance notwithstanding, aid needed to be more economically feasible (Sons 2022) and more politically monopolised. KSRelief was established in 2015, joining the institutionalisation drive that would soon impact many other sectors. Under the pretext of improving efficiency and coordination (Li 2019, 12), KSRelief has embarked on a process to monopolise the handling of aid, impairing, if not displacing, the non-governmental and quasi-governmental channels that had carried substantial aid flows in the past. In fact, authorities have made it clear to Saudi donors that KSRelief is 'the sole authority responsible for receiving relief, charitable or humanitarian donations […] and delivering them to beneficiaries abroad' (Saudi Press Agency 2020), a directive that is especially pressing in the case of Yemen, given the regime's sensitivities towards ceding control over its course. KSRelief can perform as a tool that at least balances and at most supersedes the possible detrimental effects of the military intervention for KSA's legitimacy and reputation. Through a formally centralised institution, humanitarian work is more easily attributable by Yemeni audiences and agreeable to international standards. Furthermore, there is tighter control over allocations and recipients.

After the launch of the military intervention, the Saudi-led coalition encroached upon Yemen's air and maritime space. The blockade of commercial imports, together with the destruction of 'dams, reservoirs, agriculture, and markets' (Fenton-Harvey 2019), contributed to set the conditions for the leading role of humanitarian aid within overall Saudi aid between 2015 and late 2017. Health and food security represented the two major types of allocation by project (OCHA 2015, 2016, 2017). KSA delivered regular support for the treatment of 'wounded Yemenis', predominantly to Taiz, Aden and Marib, where government-allied forces engaged in bloody confrontation with the Houthis. Moreover, the establishment of humanitarian air bridges to Aden and Marib depicts an early pattern to increase dependence on Saudi support that the coming years will see diversified and upgraded (KSRelief 2022d). Other aid categories were employed during this period, like development aid through the provision of books; or economic aid to cover public wages. However, it was not until 2018 that they became prevalent.

The interlocking between Saudi influence and the survival of the IRG had a clear geographical implication. As Hadi's government now stood out as the largest direct recipient of Saudi aid, government-controlled areas and conflict zones became the most recurrent

destinations (OCHA 2015, 2016, 2017). These geographical patterns tended to shift in line with developments in the war. As the Houthis took hold in the north, the southern and central governorates acquired renewed importance. Despite some aid to Hajjah and Sa'adah, the majority of aid targeted regions like Aden, Taiz, Shabwa and Hadramawt and Marib. Around 2017, al-Mahrah in the east and the island of Socotra would also become major destinations.

The period between 2018 and 2022 is particularly demonstrative of the relationship between foreign aid and the projection of power and control. First, aid projects nearly doubled in 2018 and maintained relatively high numbers after that in comparison to the pre-2018 years (OCHA 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). Second, there was a shift in the composition of aid: development and the economy clearly took precedence over humanitarian support (Fenton-Harvey 2019). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the consolidation of this turn indicates a resolve to cultivate power through the strategic use of aid, seeking to position KSA in the long term and nurturing (asymmetric) relationships of subordination and dependence. The policy betrays a concerted effort to ensure Saudi influence takes root in any future post-conflict scenario while shaping the political, economic and cultural arrangements underpinning the domestic order. But before providing an overview of the shift, we must delve into the interplay of external developments that, when confronted with the changing domestic outlook in KSA, shaped the transition from humanitarian to predominantly economic and development aid.

A new US administration under Trump applauded Saudi adventurism, giving KSA 'free reigns [sic] in Yemen' (Clausen 2019, 78). Since 2015, a proliferation of regional actors had intensified the competition for both security and influence. Iran was believed to have strengthened its relationship with Ansar Allah (Ulrichsen and Cafiero 2021). Oman and Qatar had directed funding to various local groups, to the great displeasure of KSA (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies 2020, 55). The UAE had made deep inroads into the political and security fabric of south Yemen. It had cultivated relations with forces whose separatist agendas and anti-Islamist/anti-Islah attitudes (ie groups linked to the Southern Transitional Council, STC) put them in an uneasy alliance with KSA's favoured partners (Harb 2019). With a military footprint in al-Mahrah governorate, an intensifying struggle for external supremacy in the southern provinces, a disadvantageous standstill in the west after the Stockholm agreement over Hodeida, volatile front lines in the central regions, and the Houthis' dominance in the north, KSA wanted to capitalise on the areas where it had managed to establish a presence.

Domestically, a rising MbS seemed closer to consolidating his position at the helm of the Kingdom's politics. The limitations of the military intervention, compounded by high levels of geopolitical and intra-Yemeni competition, called for different tools to project influence. Consistent with the trend towards domestic institutionalisation, two mechanisms specific to Yemen joined KSRelief in 2018: the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY) and the Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operations (YCHO). From then on they would become major channels for a much more diversified, structurally oriented, long-term focused, and development-driven aid.

Tapping into the potential of strategic transit and access points (Fenton-Harvey 2019), KSA began to implement projects to build, expand and renovate logistical hubs and connections (KSRelief 2022d). Airports in Aden and al-Mahrah were rehabilitated and upgraded–or, as in Marib, constructed from scratch. The ports of Nishtun in al-Mahrah, Mukalla in Hadramawt, and Mukha in Taiz have equally undergone improvements and reconstruction.

Regarding land routes, the most conspicuous example lies in the project to bring into operation al-Aber Road, the only existing overland route linking KSA to Marib (OCHA 2021). By increasing the operability and capacity of these transport infrastructures in a country under blockade and dependent on external goods, KSA diverts aid and commerce away from Houthi-controlled sites, potentially isolating them and the populations under their authority. Beyond that, KSA's role in imports and investments can grow significantly, as hinted in YCHO's inaugural declaration (KSA Government 2018); and thus in Yemen's economic activity more generally.

Allocations to other infrastructural projects cover multiple functionalities (KSRelief 2022d; OCHA 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). Housing projects, facilities for electricity generation and distribution, and hospitals are only some of the examples spanning Aden, al-Mahrah and Socotra. The operation of al-Salam hospital in Sa'adah and the Saudi hospital in Hajjah has symbolic significance. According to some accounts, the former averages 3000 daily visitors (Krimly 2019), sending a clear message of Saudi provision of vital services in nominally Houthi areas. Al-Mahrah and Socotra are the regions witnessing the most intense cultivation of influence through infrastructure, owing to Saudi geopolitical and economic interests amidst intense competition with the UAE and Oman. This goes from planning for oil transport and shipping from KSA's territory to the Arabian Sea through al-Mahrah to establishing security headquarters in Socotra.

It is during this period that KSA seems more invested in shaping Yemen's education system through formal aid channels (KSRelief 2022d). Scholarships, textbooks, equipment and monetary incentives to teaching staff are generally delivered through the Yemeni Ministry of Education, but Saudi social and cultural influence through educational content is not free from controversy, being well known for having a lasting, yet complex, impact on religious education (Al-Deen 2021, 38). Although promises to promote so-called 'moderate Islam' suggest religion-oriented aid are gradually losing importance (Chulov 2017), the language of sectarianisation has stoked fears and prejudices that entrench confrontational differences and discourage social reconciliation, finding appeal amongst Western, regional and local audiences (Aryani 2015). Such divisions along sectarian lines may feed into KSA's legitimacy and shape the parameters of an emerging order amongst strained sociopolitical communities in Yemen.

Meanwhile, stabilisation efforts through direct economic aid have played a growing role for the strangled IRG. These include cash loans to the cleaved Central Bank in Aden and fresh rounds of budgetary support, amounting to billions of dollars (KSRelief 2022d). Saudi economic aid also goes to pay government military salaries, which in 2019 amounted to a $100 million deposit per month (ACAPS 2020, 10), although inconsistencies and delays have been reported. This last example shows Saudi economic aid crosses the finances of virtually every section of the IRG's state apparatus, exposing KSA to both appreciation and resentment. With only some temporary suspensions, oil shipments have been delivered on a monthly basis (Salisbury 2019) and renewed annually (Arab News 2021). Oil grants might be expected to afford considerable leverage, especially for navigating the complicated intra-coalition politics in Aden. However, they did not prevent the Hadi/Islah–STC fighting that the 2019 Riyadh Agreement hoped to bring to an end. Despite being nominal partners in a Saudi and Emirati-brokered coalition, the IRG, with the support of prominent members of Islah, and the STC have tended to compete to gain the upper hand, often resulting in violent clashes.

KSA negotiated the Riyadh Agreement in 2019 in an attempt to stop the fighting and create a unified political and military command, albeit without immediate success (Delozier 2020).

The disputes and ensuing fragmentation within the coalition seemed to reach an impasse with the creation of the Presidential Leadership Council in April 2022, giving the final blow to Hadi's enfeebled credibility and forcing his resignation. Formed by leaders from some of the main political and military factions in Yemen (HRITC 2022), the council is a Saudi-brokered attempt to present a unified anti-Houthi front. Immediately after its announcement, KSA pledged massive economic aid to support the council (Arab News 2022). Yet it is mired with complex disputes amongst competing power centres that, despite formally adhering to a national truce, show no real signs of abating. As the battlefronts against the Houthis exhibit occasional violence at the time of writing, the council factions also engage in armed confrontation (Al Jazeera 2022).

The scope of the system of tribal payments is equally difficult to assess. Less visible transfers may still be taking place, but the current picture suggests KSA has significantly curtailed the pervasiveness it had in the past. On the one hand, the institutionalisation process favours a tendency towards programmatic work at the expense of direct cash flows (Isaac 2014, 427). On the other hand, the Saudi response to the opening of cross-border hostilities at the military intervention's outset was upgrading its border security by building fences and introducing surveillance technology, rather than resorting to traditional engagement with tribes (Ardemagni 2020, 4). However, beliefs regarding the continuity of the payment system continue to create a pretext for conflict, as clashes between the Hajour tribe and the Houthis have shown (Al-Deen 2019).

The ongoing rivalries amongst Yemeni factions do not imply that the potential of Saudi foreign aid to mould the population's attitudes and preferences has peaked. There are sources that suggest particular segments of the Yemeni society may see KSA as a constructive partner more than others. An Arab Barometer survey found 'fewer than half of the respondents support stronger ties with Saudi Arabia (44%), though more than half of those in government-controlled regions do so (58%)' (2019, 4). Here emerges a feasible pattern whereby areas and communities under Saudi economic patronage and politico-cultural influence hold more positive views towards the kingdom, arguably in ways that would advance its interests. A similar effect might be achieved amongst international audiences, being particularly desirable towards influential actors that can alleviate pressure on KSA's behaviour. Recently, the World Bank singled out the SDRPY for its work across Yemen, which creates international visibility for Saudi aid, anoints its mandate and, in turn, facilitates its continuity in KSA's favour (Fenton-Harvey 2020).

Conclusions: is it worth the aid?

This article has adopted a neoclassical realist approach to try to better understand some of the key aspects that have conditioned Saudi foreign aid to Yemen. While the objective of asserting external supremacy has remained a constant, international, regional, bilateral and domestic developments have interacted in complex ways and fed into each other. After a bad start during Yemen's unification on the heels of Saleh's support to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Saudi aid walked between governmental recipients sustaining patrimonial structures and direct engagement with powerful tribes. Aid flowed through a decentralised amalgamation of channels, often with little coordination or clear strategy. The post-2011 period saw an

increasingly militarised political struggle spreading across the country that would shape much of Saudi foreign aid. Transitioning through episodes marked by the prominence of development or humanitarian support, the dynamics of war, regional competition, and elite scrambling had some form of manifestation in the patterns, conduits, and allocations of aid.

Over the 1994–2022 period, Saudi foreign aid has gone through significant changes. Informal conduits have given room to more standardised institutional platforms. Project-driven aid has grown at the expense of–still relevant –cash payments, and the Saudi state's involvement is now more salient across the aid process, from formulation to implementation. However, it is difficult to assess whether Saudi aid has veered more decisively towards state-building activities and away from cultivating the autonomy of other social recipients, not least since the complex hybridisation of sovereignty largely renders this dualistic over-simplification moot. Legitimacy has many contenders in Yemen, and political capital, like the Yemeni state itself, is heavily fractured.

This leads us to highlight how foreign aid is embedded into broader struggles and processes of ordering. As a mechanism with the potential to influence people's dispositions, aid can contribute to shaping sociopolitical organisation in Yemen. Its impact on relations and practices may translate into proximity or distance; domination and subordination; acquiescence or resistance. Our empirical analysis shows KSA's actions cultivated Yemeni recipients in different areas and influential international audiences. Foreign aid may affect the actors' power-laden positions and position-takings in the long term, while accentuating inequalities and differences between government and Houthi-controlled areas. However, our analysis has paid attention to the rationales underpinning Saudi foreign aid, rather than centring on the effects on attitudes and behaviour. Future research could provide new insights following this line of enquiry.

Aid can carry and catalyse structuring conceptions of what Yemen should look like, who should be entitled to what, and the arbitrary divisions and gradations that organise political life in the Yemeni social space (Bourdieu, Wacquant, and Farage 1994). Such ordering attempts have associated notions of power and authority, partially dictating and potentially shaping actors' practices, behaviours and relations. In its potential role in forming political orders, the study of foreign aid would greatly benefit from approaches taking inspiration from Bourdieu's work.

To conclude, we note this article has not addressed the very important issue of Yemeni migrants in Saudi Arabia as something that could be conceptualised as an aid mechanism. Migration and visas have been used as both soft- and hard-power tools in the Saudi–Yemeni relationship in the past, and this is likely to be the case in the future as well. Future research may explore this interesting case through the lenses of aid.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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